

TUFTS UNIVERSITY



Health & Nutrition Letter

THE FRIEDMAN SCHOOL OF NUTRITION SCIENCE AND POLICY

YOUR GUIDE TO LIVING HEALTHIER LONGER

51 Healthy Foods You Can Say “YES” To

Tired of being told what not to eat? Here’s a sampling of the many choices you can feel good about including as part of a balanced diet.

HARDLY A DAY GOES BY, it seems, without the news media reporting some food that’s been found to be bad for you. One day it’s processed meats; the next, it’s baked goods made with trans-fatty acids. Faced with this litany of “don’ts,” you can start to wonder whether *any* food is OK to eat.

In fact, scientists know of a whole cornucopia of healthy foods you can choose from. Not only are there plenty of food choices that are OK—many foods can actually give your body a boost. Your daily diet can supply everything from essential nutrients to compounds that have been positively associated with preventing diseases and minimizing the toll of aging. These are foods you can enthusiastically say “yes!” to as part of a well-rounded diet. Many of them have been covered in depth in previous issues of this newsletter.

But we’re not talking about so-called “superfoods.” Foods aren’t magic pills; eating spinach won’t cure what ails you any more than it will make you as strong as Popeye.

And even healthful foods like those mentioned in this Special Supplement are good for you only in the overall context of a balanced diet. Gorging on any one type of food, no matter how “healthy,” won’t give you the nutrients you need—regardless of what some fad diets would have you believe. Nor will simply adding healthful foods “fix” your diet: “Sprinkling nuts on top of a hot-fudge sundae, although nuts are ‘good for you,’ does not negate the saturated fat and calories in the sundae,” cautions Alice H. Lichtenstein, DSc, Stanley N. Gershoff Professor of Nutrition in Tufts’ Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy.

Keep in mind, too, that even good food choices have calories. Robin B. Kanarek, PhD, a professor of nutrition and behavior at the Friedman School, cites the example of a friend who wanted to lose weight, and couldn’t understand why it wasn’t happening—she was eating only fruit. “The answer to why she wasn’t losing weight was quite simple: Fruit has calories, and seven cantaloupes, six apples, six oranges, etc., had as many calories as what she regularly consumed before.”

Some of the foods for which researchers have found positive health effects are particularly packed with calories; you should say “yes” to these only when saying “no” to other foods. Substitute nuts, for example, for candy bars when you need a snack—but if you just *add* nuts to your diet, you’re

upping your calorie intake. Similarly, vegetable oils can be a healthy choice instead of animal-derived fats such as butter or lard. That doesn’t mean drinking a cupful of canola oil every day is a good idea, though.

The 51 healthy foods to say “yes” to listed on these pages represent merely a sampling of the variety of foods you can choose in a nutritious diet. (We could pretty much list all fruits and vegetables, for instance, but that would make this list either long or boring or both.) This sampling is designed to give you ideas for meals and even snacks that point your eating plan in the right direction. Any one food on the list isn’t necessarily “better” for you than other choices, cautions Jeanne P. Goldberg, PhD, RD, professor of nutrition and director of the Center on Nutrition Communication at the Friedman School. Take salmon, for example. “While salmon does have omega 3s, other fish are quite low in fat,” Goldberg notes. So salmon isn’t “better” than, say, flounder—the key is to include more fish of all kinds in your diet than most Americans now do. (And remember to bake or broil your fish, not fry it—preparation matters, too!)

If this list simply gives you some new foods to try, that’s a big step in the right direction. Studies have shown the importance of eating a variety of healthy foods. But most Americans aren’t doing a very good job at diversifying their diets: Potatoes and head lettuce account for nearly half our vegetables, and only six fruit choices (orange juice, bananas, apples, watermelon, apple juice, grapes) total half of our fruit consumption. Check out our list for some fresh ideas.

It’s even OK—occasionally—to indulge, in moderation, in some of those foods you’ve been told to say “no” to. Don’t feel guilty, says Kanarek, about having a small piece of chocolate or a little ice cream.

But we think you’ll find some of these healthful choices—and the related options that they suggest—appealing enough that you might not even be tempted.

1 Acorn Squash—A source of lycopene, folate and vitamins A and C, winter squash of all sorts also gives you dietary fiber. Plus acorn squash, for example, is rich in potassium—almost 900 milligrams per cup.

2 Almonds—A good source of potassium, almonds, like other nuts, are low in saturated fat and high in unsatu-

rated fats. But they're also high in calories, so *substitute* almonds for a snack that's high in trans- or saturated fat; otherwise the added calories offset any heart-healthy benefits. Recent research from the Antioxidants Research Laboratory at Tufts' Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging has demonstrated an antioxidant synergy between flavonoids and vitamin E in whole almonds. Almonds are also a source of riboflavin, magnesium and zinc.

3 Apples—You know what they say about keeping the doctor away? An apple a day may not be quite *that* powerful, but apples are a good source of fiber, and a medium-sized apple has only 80 calories. Red apples are among the fruits highest in quercetin, which researchers are studying for possible antioxidant benefits. But the antioxidants are concentrated in the skin, so don't peel before eating.

4 Apricots—A good source of vitamins A and C, apricots also are a way to get lycopene, which has been associated with cancer prevention in men (see tomatoes, below).

5 Asparagus—With just 25 calories in eight medium-sized asparagus spears, you get 25 percent of your daily vitamin A and 15 percent of vitamin C, plus essential folic acid.

6 Bananas—A good source of magnesium, which protects against bone loss and is associated with heart health, bananas are also packed with potassium. With 422 milligrams of potassium in one medium banana, you're getting almost 10 percent of the 4,700 milligrams the Institute of Medicine says you need. Potassium helps lower blood pressure and reduces the risk of kidney stones and bone loss.

7 Barley—Looking for ways to get the whole-grain servings recommended in the new federal dietary guidelines? (Six to 13 servings of grains depending on your caloric intake, of which at least half should come from whole grains.) Try cooking up some barley—also a good source of iron and minerals—in place of white rice. But make sure you're buying whole-grain barley, not the "pearl" variety with the healthful outer husk removed. Whole grains have been associated with pro-

tection against heart disease and cancer, and may help control diabetes. Other good whole-grain choices of this type include bulgur, buckwheat groats (also known as kasha), millet and quinoa (see below).

8 Beef eye of round—While studies continue to suggest it's smart to limit your red-meat consumption, when you've gotta have beef, eye of round is the leanest cut. A three-ounce serving has nearly half your daily protein and just 160 calories. Beef is a good source of zinc and vitamin B6.

9 Blueberries—Tufts researchers are studying blueberries for their antioxidant benefits, including the possibility that they may boost brain functions that weaken as we age. Other scientists have found in animal testing that blueberries may lower cholesterol levels. Blueberries are also a good source of vitamin K, which Tufts researchers suggest may play a role in preventing osteoporosis and hardening of the arteries. Berries of all sorts are good choices, too: Blackberries, for example, also deliver vitamin K, along with a quarter of your daily vitamin C in just a half-cup. If berries are out of season, try frozen berries blended into a smoothie.

10 Bran flakes—Research shows that breakfast really is "the most important meal of the day," and bran flakes can get you off to a good start. You'll get lots of fiber and magnesium—plus many other nutrients if you pick a moderately fortified cereal. Remember to use skim or low-fat milk and to go easy on the sugar. Need a touch of sweetness? Top your bran flakes with some berries (see above) or other fruit.

11 Broccoli—You probably don't need any convincing that broccoli, the classic "good for you" vegetable, is a healthy choice. But one of the biggest changes in the government's new food pyramid is an increased emphasis on dark green vegetables—like broccoli and leafy greens such as spinach and kale. Most Americans need to double or triple their intake of dark green veggies, according to the experts.

12 Brown rice—Part of the push to replace processed foods with whole grains means eating more brown rice instead of the white stuff you prob-

ably grew up on. Whole grains like brown rice include the bran and germ of the natural grain that are lost in processing to make white rice, which contains only the inner endosperm. A lot of good stuff gets lost in the bargain: Brown rice has almost 10 times as much phosphorus and potassium as white rice, for instance.

13 Brussels sprouts—Another no-surprise inclusion, brussels sprouts may do your body even more good than you'd guess. A half-cup of brussels sprouts—only about four sprouts—delivers 235 micrograms of vitamin K, which is almost double what the average American gets in a whole day.

14 Canola oil—Here's where substitution is really the key: Replacing butter, lard or other saturated fats with vegetable oils that contain monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats can pay dividends for your heart. Canola oil is the very lowest in saturated fat, with other choices such as safflower and soybean oil close behind; the differences are small enough that you should pick whichever polyunsaturated oil you prefer. Olive oil has the highest proportion of monounsaturated fat and has earned heart-healthy labeling from the FDA, but it's not necessarily best. Let taste drive your choice: When you want flavor-free oil, go with polyunsaturated; when you want flavor, pick olive or peanut oils. Whichever you choose, remember that all fat contains 120 calories a tablespoon—so go easy, and don't *add* fat to your diet just to get more vegetable oil.

15 Cantaloupe—That orange color inside should clue you in that cantaloupe is a great source of beta-carotene—100 percent of your daily value in a single cup. Cantaloupe is no slouch in the vitamin C count, either, with 113 percent of daily needs per cup. Other melons such as honeydew are also good choices, though lower in both beta-carotene and vitamin C.

16 Carrots—You knew carrots were good for you, but did you know *how* good? Carrots are a prime example of why it's important to eat a "rainbow" of different fruits and vegetables representing the whole spectrum of colors. This orange option

delivers 150 percent of your daily vitamin A in just half a cup, plus lesser percentages of a variety of other vitamins and minerals.

17 Cauliflower—Don't let the pasty white color fool you. Cauliflower is a cruciferous vegetable (meaning it's from the mustard family), just like broccoli and brussels sprouts. Compounds in cruciferous vegetables have been suggested as possible cancer protectors. In any case, cauliflower packs a nutritional punch, with 45 percent of your daily vitamin C in just half a cup.

18 Chicken breasts—Boneless, skinless chicken breasts offer great convenience and a good way to get protein (half your daily value in a three-ounce serving) without a lot of fat (three grams total, including just one gram of saturated fat) or calories (140, only 18 percent of them from fat). Broil, bake or grill—don't fry—to keep chicken a smart choice.

19 Collard greens—Another option in the dark-green vegetable category, collard greens are packed with vitamin A. You'll get 150 percent of your daily value of A in just a half-cup of cooked collard greens, plus 30 percent of your vitamin C and 15 percent of calcium.

20 Cranberry juice—Studies suggest cranberry juice can help ward off urinary-tract infections and might even prevent periodontitis and gingivitis by keeping bacteria from adhering to your teeth and gums. It's also loaded with vitamin C. Look for juice that's artificially sweetened to avoid added sugar. (Note that cranberry juice can interact with the blood-thinning medication warfarin to cause bleeding.)

21 Kale—Here's another vitamin-A powerhouse as well as a way to up your intake of dark green vegetables. Like most leafy greens, Kale is a source of lutein. A mere half-cup of cooked kale also rewards you with almost seven times the recommended daily amount of vitamin K.

22 Kidney Beans—Rich in fiber, iron and protein, beans of all sorts can be a key ingredient in an occasional meatless meal. They're also a source of potassium and magnesium, as well as folate, which some

researchers are studying for potential benefits to the brain. Beans of all types—besides kidney, for instance, black, pinto and navy—are good choices and nutritionally similar. Kidney beans give you marginally the most protein and fiber with the fewest calories, but pintos are tops in folate. Cook your own using dried beans, to avoid added salt in canned beans.

23 Mackerel—Less familiar than other cold-water fish, mackerel is worth adding to your seafood repertoire because it also contains heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids. It's also a good dietary source of vitamin D, as well as of selenium, which has antioxidant benefits. (Small children and pregnant women should eat mackerel sparingly, however, because of the risk that some fish may have high levels of mercury.)

24 Milk (non- or low-fat)—That ad campaign urging you to get milk is on-target—as long as you stick to skim or low-fat milk. Drinking milk makes it easy to meet the new dietary guidelines' recommendation to get the equivalent of three cups of dairy products daily. In addition to delivering calcium, fortified milk is among the best ways to get vitamin D, which your body needs in tandem with calcium to build bone strength to prevent osteoporosis.

25 Oatmeal—Besides the benefits of starting your day with a healthful breakfast, and besides the fact that oatmeal helps you get whole grains, oatmeal has been shown to lower cholesterol. You can also lower blood cholesterol with oat bran and with cold cereal made from oatmeal or oat bran. (Watch out for instant oatmeal packages, though, which typically contain lots of extra sugar.)

26 Okra—A food better known in southern states, okra is a good source of folate and also gives you 20 percent of your vitamin C needs in just half a cup. A recent study suggests that okra, along with eggplant and whole grains, among other foods, can be part of a cholesterol-lowering diet. (Breeding and frying okra, southern-style, adds so many calories that it offsets any health benefits, however!)

27 Oranges—Of course, you already know about the bene-

fits of eating from the “sunshine tree”—notably, getting more than a day's dose of vitamin C in just one navel orange. Oranges also are a pretty good source of potassium.

28 Peaches—Peaches and similar fruit such as nectarines deliver modest amounts of vitamins (especially A and C), niacin and minerals (particularly potassium), while satisfying your craving for something sweet—all at a tiny price in calories (only 40 in a medium-sized peach).

29 Peanut butter—Most of the fat in peanut butter remains monounsaturated, making “PB” an option as a sandwich substitute for meats high in saturated fat. A two-tablespoon serving has eight grams of protein and 25 percent of your daily niacin. There's no nutritional difference between creamy and crunchy peanut butter—just texture.

30 Popcorn—Air-popped popcorn (easy on the salt and butter!) makes a filling whole-grain snack. A cup of plain air-popped popcorn has just 30 calories.

31 Pork loin—This is the leanest cut of “the other white meat” (actually a red meat). A three-ounce serving delivers 32 percent of daily protein needs with just 2.5 grams of saturated fat and 120 calories. Because it's so lean, be careful to cook pork loin to the safe internal temperature of 160 degrees but not beyond. Use a meat thermometer, and remove from the heat 5-10 degrees before it's done, as the pork will keep cooking while “resting.” Even if still pink in the center, pork is safe to eat at 160 degrees.

32 Prunes—Prunes aren't just your mom's constipation cure. A half-cup of dried prunes does provide a quarter of your daily fiber, sure, but you're also getting potassium and vitamin A, plus vitamin B6 and powerful antioxidants.

33 Quinoa—Another whole-grain option (see the listing for barley for more), quinoa is catching on as an alternative to refined grains and other mealtime “starch” choices. Remember to rinse it well before cooking.

34 Romaine lettuce—This salad staple counts toward your daily goal of eating more leafy greens,

and delivers vitamin A and C along with a tasty crunch. Boston, Bibb and red or green leaf lettuces are other good salad choices (easy on the fatty dressings!), though not as vitamin-packed. Iceberg lettuce has only a fraction of the nutritional value of its greener, darker kin.

35 Salmon—The classic example of fish with heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids, salmon can be broiled, baked or grilled to make a main dish. Keep in mind, however, that even fat that's good for you comes with a caloric price tag—160 in a three-ounce serving of farmed salmon, 120 for the same portion of wild Atlantic salmon. If you occasionally opt for canned salmon with the bones, you'll also get calcium in the bargain.

36 Sardines—Another fatty fish that's rich in omega-3s, sardines are also a good source of vitamin D and (eaten with the bones) calcium.

37 Shredded-wheat cereal—In addition to the benefits of a healthy breakfast, shredded-wheat cereal gives you a good start on your daily goal of 400 milligrams of magnesium, which has been associated with reduced risk of diabetes. Just two regular-sized biscuits have 80 milligrams of magnesium.

38 Spinach—Popeye was onto something here. Besides being the quintessential dark leafy green and rich in vitamins A and K (plus some folate), spinach is also packed with lutein. Researchers have found that lutein consumption is associated with a reduced risk of macular degeneration, the leading cause of vision loss and blindness in people age 65 and older.

39 Strawberries—Like most berries (see blueberries, above), grapes and prunes, strawberries contain anthocyanins, powerful antioxidants that improve circulation and may have other health benefits. Strawberries are also a good choice for folate and vitamin C.

40 Sweet potatoes—Try sweet potatoes instead of regular potatoes. They have more beta-carotene (a whopping 25,000 IU in one baked sweet potato with skin), vitamin C, folate, calcium and manganese than white spuds.

41 Tea—What to drink with all this? Try a nice cup of freshly brewed tea instead of a sugary soft drink. Research has suggested many possible benefits from the phytonutrient antioxidants in tea, called catechins; the strongest scientific evidence is for reducing heart disease. There's not a significant difference in antioxidants between caffeinated and decaffeinated tea, but we're not talking about herbal teas here. Iced tea contains only low concentrations of catechins, however. Premixed iced-teas and ready-to-drink teas are likewise low in antioxidants—but laden with sugar.

42 Tofu—The range of benefits hoped for from tofu and other soy products has been called into question, but tofu can still be a smart substitute for meat in your meal planning. It's a good source of protein and calcium if it's been prepared with calcium carbonate.

43 Tomatoes—Men have been gobbling tomatoes ever since research suggested that the lycopene therein may be protective against prostate cancer; a recent study points to a similar effect for pancreatic cancer in men. Tomatoes are also a good choice for lutein, and a single medium tomato contains half your daily value of vitamin C.

44 Tuna—Besides being a good choice for omega-3s, tuna is high in vitamins B6 and B12 as well as protein. If you buy canned tuna, opt for water-packed, not oil-, and resist the impulse to mix it with fatty mayo; try low-fat mayo or mayonnaise mixed with low-fat yogurt.

45 Turkey breast—Like its poultry cousin, chicken, skinless turkey breast delivers plenty of protein—38 percent of daily needs in a three-ounce portion—without a lot of fat (five grams, including 1.5 grams of saturated fat). Turkey is also rich in B vitamins and selenium. Besides making a good main dish, sliced turkey breast can substitute for processed meats in your sandwiches.

46 Walnuts—Remember what we said about almonds? The same goes for walnuts: They're low in saturated fat, free of cholesterol and high in unsaturated fats, but only a good

idea when replacing foods packed with saturated fat. Although a quarter-cup of walnuts contains four grams of protein, you're also consuming 160 calories. Walnuts are relatively high in essential minerals and in folate.

47 Watermelon—A good source of lycopene, a cup of watermelon also gives you about 20 percent of your daily vitamin C and 15 percent of vitamin A, in a sweet treat with only 45 calories.

48 White fish—While fatty fish such as salmon have the added benefit of omega-3s, they needn't be the only fish in your repertoire. White fish such as flounder, cod and sole, although not high in heart-healthy fats, are also outstanding choices. A three-ounce serving of cod, for example, offers 30 percent of your daily protein with only 68 calories and less than one fat gram. Fish sticks and fish sandwiches don't count as healthy choices, however—go with baked, broiled or grilled fish.

49 Whole-grain bread—The new federal dietary guidelines encourage Americans to consume the whole-grain equivalent of at least three one-ounce slices of bread daily. Switching from white to whole-grain bread is an easy way to get started—but check the label to make sure the first ingredient listed is “whole wheat” or another whole grain. Don't be fooled by terms such as “multi-grain,” “100 percent wheat,” “cracked wheat” or “seven-grain.”

50 Whole-grain pasta—If you've been put off by tough, grainy whole-wheat pasta in the past, it's time to give it another try. In the first quarter of 2005 alone, more than 28 new whole-grain pastas were introduced, taking advantage of new technology to make tastier products.

51 Yogurt (non- or low-fat)—Here's a delicious way to get your daily dairy. Besides calcium, yogurt gives you protein, magnesium and a variety of vitamins including B12. It's even been linked to better breath. (Yogurt doesn't have vitamin D, however, so it's no substitute for milk.) Instead of sugared varieties, control calories by adding your own fresh fruit to plain, low-fat yogurt. ♦